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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature on telephone-based schoolwork assistance programs and describes the activities of several such programs. Research literature indicates that properly organized lessons and assignments result in greater student achievement. Research on characteristics of students who procrastinate in doing their schoolwork is discussed. It is noted that teachers' awareness of students' problems with procrastination and promotion of students' self-esteem car help students who procrastinate. Research on positive and negative effects of homework is reviewed. Several telephone-based schoolwork assistance programs are described. These include: (1) a hotline staffed by certified teachers in Jacksonville, Florida; (2) the New York State Literacy Hotline, which uses a database to organize its academic information; (3) the Adult Basic Education Tele-teacher program at Rio Salado Community College; (4) the Philadelphia school district's schoolwork assistance program, Project HELP; (5) Denver's homework hotline; and (6) the Bridgeport, Connecticut homework hotline. It is recommended that programs operate Mondays through Thurdays; serve all students, including non-English speaking students and special education students; be promoted; and receive commercial support. A list of 19 reference items is included. (BC)

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CURRENT TELEPHONE-BASED SCHOOLWORK ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS: AN ANALYSIS OF THEIR FINDINGS

ED337289

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Current Telephone-Based Schoolwork Assistance Programs:
An Analysis of Their Findings

Introduction

The Library Company of Philadelphia installed telephones in its two branches in 1878. Thus, subscribers could call for information (Stone, 1977) In 1897, the Boston Public Library installed a telephone and a clerk provided information to callers. If the information was not available, a runner would go to another library to get it (Library Journal, 1897). These events could be looked on as the predecessors of today's schoolwork hotlines (Scott, 1988)

Teachers at all levels of education assign schoolwork in the form of daily homework or longer term reports and projects. Schoolwork's value has been questioned since Brooks (1916) examined the issue. While the research in the area has produced conflicting findings, one point stands out: Schoolwork cannot influence achievement if it cannot be completed.

Telephone-based schoolwork assistance programs were designed to help students complete their work. Typically, experienced teachers answer students' telephone calls and help them finish their assignments. This assistance is usually restricted to showing students how to reach the answer to their question rather than providing the answer directly.

The value of these assistance programs must be determined through schoolwork completion rather than achievement in a given subject. Therefore, research in the area has generally taken the form of student, parent and educator satisfaction surveys. Virtually all of the research has shown that the parties studied have had been satisfied with the programs. Attempts to go farther on this line have produced conflicting findings.

Schoolwork

Few topics have inspired as much interest as schoolwork. Rickards (1982) noted that the issue has been studied extensively, but little definitive information on the topic has emerged. Teachers, according to Rickards, should be aware of this research in order to form their own opinions on schoolwork's value.

Lesson organization is the clarity within a relationship involving the parts of a communication (Kallison, 1986). There are two teacher controlled factors in organization; delivering the material in a manner which shows the important relationships and emphasizing them through verbal statements.

Kallison examined the effect of organization and sequence on student achievement. He formed two levels for each variable, proper and manipulated sequence and explicit and nonexplicit organization. Kallison's findings showed

that a significant effect for organization occurred. There was no significant treatment effect for sequence.

Kallison worked with university students. However, his findings seem to be applicable to younger students as well. Briefly, a properly organized lesson, including an assignment, will result in higher levels of student achievement.

Morse (1987) attended to procrastinating students, those who failed to complete their assignments on time. The topic has received limited attention in the literature although Broadus (1983) listed sixteen characteristics displayed by procrastinators. Morse claimed that seven of Broadus's characteristics could be applied to elementary school students: (1) self-concept, (2) perfection, (3) fear of failure, (4) fear of success, (5) rebellion, (6) locus of control and (7) lack of skill.

Different researchers have suggested strategies designed to overcome the characteristics linked to procrastination. Awareness of the problem, restructuring dialogue and promoting self-esteem are common to the intervention strategies. Other researchers have advocated programs which are based on a multimodal approach.

Morse used a multimodal approach with a group of procrastinators. She found that they improved their assignment completion rate through the course of the treatment. Morse's approach was based on process and a

student who could not complete an assignment because of lack of information would not benefit from her effort. A schoolwork hotline would complete the model.

Epstein (1988) found that achievement in mathematics and reading was inversely correlated with the amount of time elementary school students spent doing homework, the amount of parental assistance and the number of teachers' requests for parental involvement. The writer conceded that the results were counterintuitive and attributed them to the shortcomings associated with correlational studies. Epstein suggested that homework should be designed in a manner which would encourage parental assistance.

Solomon and Scott (1988) reviewed the research surrounding homework. The writers concluded that homework played an important role in the schools. Teachers use it to extend their lessons, prepare students for their upcoming learning experiences and enrich their instructional programs.

Singh (1988a) surveyed high school students and their parents and teachers and found that the majority in each group favored homework. Seventy-five minutes was looked on as the maximum time that should be devoted to completing homework. The groups supported the establishment of a homework hotline which they concluded should operate for at least two hours Mondays through Thursdays.

Singh (1988b) reported the results of a survey on homework and homework hotlines for elementary school

students. The writer included students, parents and teachers in his sample and found that 39 percent of the students and parents and 10 percent of the teachers were interested in the service one or two nights a week. Singh also included information on cost and funding sources.

Cooper (1989) synthesized the research on homework. He claimed that the research reflected events of the times. Cooper's review attended to the positive and negative results of homework. Among the negative points, he stated that homework would accentuate existing social inequities in that poorer children will encounter more difficulties in completing their assignments because they are more likely to work than their peers and less likely to have a place at home to prepare their assignments.

Cooper did identify a grade effect. Here, homework had strong positive effects on high school student achievement, some influence on junior high school student achievement but little effect on elementary school student achievement.

Schoolwork Assistance Programs

Ivascyn (1984) found that homework assistance was important for student progress. In fact, students may be adversely affected if this assistance is not available. The writer used six secondary school students in his study and collected his data through interviews.

Ivascyn found that parental concern was important to the students who participated in his study. However, the students described their parents as apprehensive and not always available for assistance. This factor was important because homework completion was associated with positive attitudes toward school and subject matter.

Getting help immediately was important for the students. They were not interested in receiving the correct answer as much as finding out how to reach it. They did not ask for clarification in class because of fear and embarassment. Through these findings, Ivascyn stated that the homework assistance program had a positive effect on the participants.

Wood (1984) described a student schoolwork assistance prorgam in Jacksonville, Florida. This program was sponsored by the University of North Florida and the Duval County Public School System. Hotline telephones were answered by certified teachers who were enrolled in a University of North Florida program. Program personnel conducted training sessions and supervised the teachers. The training sessions emphasized strategies designed to assist callers. The program operated from 5:00 PM to 8:00 PM on Mondays through Thursdays when school was in session. At least two elementary school teachers, one foreign language teacher and one secondary mathematics teacher sat on each team.

At times, Wood reported, all of the telephone lines were being used. When this occurred, an answering machine took the calls which were returned later. Therefore, each caller received a response from a hotline teacher. A telephone line for hearing impaired students was available.

This program was considered to be successful. Because of its success, several groups of schools were identified as Homework Assistance Centers. These centers formed the School Based Homework Assistance Program where individual assistance was provided for students. This program operated for two hours a day, twice a week.

The New York State Literacy Hotline offered toll-free referral services to 2,766 callers over one year (Wister, 1987). While the relationship between this program and homework hotlines is limited, there were two factors which might be useful to school districts interested in starting the service. First, New York used a database to organize its information. Second, Wister reported that only one call in a language other than English was taken.

The use of a database is appealing because it allows those answering the telephone to provide information quickly. If a student wants to follow a topic, an appropriate reference work could be located immediately. Using men and women who can function in languages other than English would be advantageous in communities where relatively large numbers of those who are more comfortable speaking these languages

live. However, if the number who use this service is negligible, hiring a fulltime person for this position would be unsound economically.

Vanis and Mills (1987) described the Adult Basic Education Tele-teacher program which was implemented by Rio Salado Community College. Designed to provide ready access to adult basic education students, the sponsors set up a toll free telephone line and hired a certified adult educator to answer calls. The teacher was told to encourage students to explain their requests and show steps toward solving a problem rather than give answers directly. The sponsors prepared and distributed promotional literature and contacted libraries, community organizations and adult educators. In the 1986-87 school year, 160 calls were taken. A majority of the callers asked for information on class locations and times. The project was discontinued because of limited use.

The School District of Philadelphia's schoolwork assistance program began in 1979. Today, the program is known as Project HELP. Originally, the program was staffed by a group of elementary school teachers and specialists in secondary science, mathematics and foreign language. In time, teachers who were fluent in Spanish and the Asian languages were added to the group in order to serve children who were not comfortable in English.

Solomon and Scott (1988) reported the findings of a Project HELP user survey. The evaluators telephoned 263

students who used Project HELP's services. The results showed that 152 girls (58%) and 111 boys (42%) participated in the survey. By school level, 195 secondary school students (74%) and 68 elementary school students participated (26%). Of the 68 elementary school students, 59 (87%) were enrolled in grades four, five and six. Two hundred and sixty students (99%) said they called for help to finish their daily homework. Three students wanted to talk to a teacher about a report (1%). When asked if they received the help they asked for, 243 said they did (92%) and 20 said they did not (8%). The respondents were asked how often they called HELP. Here, 123 (47%) said they did so at least twice.

Denver's homework hotline started in 1985 (Pedley, 1987). This hotline is designed to serve students at all grade levels. It operates on the assumption that teachers follow state guidelines for assignments in terms of student time.

Five teachers in two teams work from 5:00 PM to 9:00 PM Mondays through Thursdays when school is in session. Another two teachers stay in reserve to cover absentees. The teachers are paid.

Hotline teachers attended a training session before they began working. The training session included a discussion of the hotline's purpose, work habits and strategies for dealing with students. Teachers, for

instance, were encouraged to support active student involvement in their work.

Students must receive parental approval before calling the hotline. They are given additional information in school. Finally, teachers give their interested students an operator's license.

Coca-Cola, Safeway, Mountain Bell and local television and radio stations support the hotline through donations of money and air time. The funds are used to underwrite the teacher's salaries and pay for telephone time.

Gutner (1990) described the Bridgeport, Connecticut homework hotline. Evolving from a program in which five teacher volunteers worked with students in grades four, five and six, the hotline has expanded and works with students in grades one through seven. Today, 25 teachers answer students' questions from 4:00 PM to 7:00 PM, Mondays through Thursdays, when school is in session.

The hotline began when one teacher conferred with a representative of the United Federation of Teachers in New York City. The Federation operates a hotline. With startup information in hand, a group of Bridgeport teachers wrote a series of proposals in order to underwrite the hotline. These proposals were funded by the National Education Association, the Bridgeport Board of Education, the Bridgeport Education Association, Aetna Life and Casualty and General Electric.

The hotline sponsors started an advertising campaign. They mailed letters to parents notifying them about the program, prepared stickers with the hotline number on them and designed posters. In addition, the hotline runs contests and activities through the school year in order to encourage children to call.

Five teachers staffed the program at its start. All were volunteers. One was fluent in Spanish. Each teacher served for one or two weeks. Eventually, between 55 and 85 calls were taken each evening. Gutner reported that parents who were enrolled in night school were calling, pretending they were children in order to complete their assignments.

The hotline teachers try to show their callers how to get answers to their questions rather than tell them directly. When personal questions are raised by the students, the hotline teachers try to work with them: "If some children are going to use the sevice just to have a chance to speak to someone, we'll address that need as well. ... More and more, we have kids going home to empty houses. We feel this gives them the opportunity to work with an adult and get some help" (p. 60).

Recommendations

Telephone-based schoolwork assistance programs seem to benefit students who are unable to complete their daily

and longterm assignments. Certain components are common to the programs which are operating today.

First, the programs operate on Mondays through Thursdays when school is in session. This schedule is important because of the need for assistance on a daily basis. The assignment due tomorrow may have little value the following day. Programs may run for three or four hours each evening, starting at 4:00 PM or 5:00 PM. Starting time or span did not seem to be an issue.

Second, programs should attend to all students. Restricting service to students at certain grade levels or subjects may lead to problems. Consequently, each hotline unit should include elementary school teachers and secondary school teachers. Since mathematics tends to be the subject which produces the greatest number of calls, teachers who are conversant with the subject should be available in the event a specialist is busy.

Third, school districts are serving many students who are more comfortable in languages other than English. Attempts should be made to place teachers on the hotline staff who speak these languages if it is economically feasible to do so.

Fourth, the literature revealed that schoolwork for special education students is drawing more attention. These students have needs which differ from their peers and steps

should be taken to address them. Adding a special education teacher to the hotline staff would be beneficial.

Fifth, promoting schoolwork hotlines is important. Students must be made aware of the service if they are going to use it. Promotion may take a number of forms. Radio and television messages, pencils with the hotline number engraved on them and posters are some examples. Once students call the hotline, they tend to become frequent users.

Sixth, commercial support can be beneficial. With tight school district budgets, large and small businesses can step in in to provide funds for salaries and telephone use. Obtaining this support may be as simple as asking for it or writing proposals for consideration by funding sources.

Schoolwork assistance programs can help students complete their assignments and act as an important public relations vehicle for the schools. Members of different groups with interests in education can combine their efforts to help students and promote the schools. In a time when unsupported school criticism is increasing, schoolwork assistance programs can show the schools in a positive light.

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